

The Bahtabah Aboriginal Land Council is giving the public a rare opportunity to better understand one of the world's oldest cultures. Staff Writer HELEN ROBINSON reports.

IT must have been a humdrum of a beach party — a crowd of jovial guests, a bonfire, music and the smell of fresh seafood cooking.

People laughed and danced through the night. And like most parties, there was a bit of a mess left the next morning.

It was probably like any other good party, except that this one took place more than 40,000 years ago.

On a lonely, windswept stretch of beach just south of Swansea Heads lies evidence of thousands of feasts held by generations of Aborigines.

To an unsuspecting beachgoer, it looks like any other sandy beach. With an Aboriginal tour guide, the dunes become middens, two large sand dunes of broken shell created by the leftovers of countless feasts, huge mounds of kitchen 'litter'.

Very few meals or social gatherings would be remembered thousands of years after the event. To the descendants of those Aborigines who feasted on the Swansea beach, the Bahtabah clan, these middens are special places.

Mr Michael Green, co-ordinator of the Bahtabah Aboriginal Land Council, believes such sites are part of the entire nation's heritage and are special to all Australians, not just descendants of those original inhabitants.

In an effort to help white Australians understand one of the oldest cultures in the world, the Bahtabah Land Council struck on the idea of conducting tours of a few Aboriginal historical sites around Lake Macquarie.

In conjunction with a Central Coast company, It's Easy Tours, for

the past year the Bahtabah group has been giving tourists a glimpse of the wealth of traditional Aboriginal culture in their area.

Mr Green said it was an entrepreneurial move, probably a first for the State, that had turned out to be highly successful. The hard work of a dozen people working with the Bahtabah Land Council was vindicated when their tours won a NSW Tourism Award two weeks ago, a special commendation for heritage/cultural tourism.

The two-hour guided tour takes in four sites from Swansea to Kahibah, the territory inhabited by the Bahtabah people for thousands of years.

On a wet, cold day this week Mr Green conducted an impromptu tour for *The Herald*.

As we drove to the first site, Mr Green pointed out a vacant block of land within a stone's throw of the lake entrance at Swansea.

He said it was a sacred site, a burial ground, where 22 Aboriginal skeletons were found by archaeologists about 17 years ago.

Just south of Swansea Heads, six-metre waves pounded a strip of sand nestled near Frenchmans Rock, each wave stealing sand and stone.

It looked like any other rocky beach, but Mr Green knows it was once a stone quarry used for centuries by Aboriginal men as a vital source of rock for axe heads, spear tips and other stone implements.

'See this stone,' he said, picking one at random, 'it's been struck there to produce very sharp stone flakes for spear heads.'

He said the stone was commonly called Merewether chert, a grey-white rock that is hard but brittle enough to strike and flake off thin slivers. Sure enough, there were ob-



Stone quarries around Lake Macquarie supplied the Aborigines with vital axe heads, spear tips and other stone implements.

vious strike marks on the rock in Mr Green's hand.

At random he picks up a small sliver of stone, there are countless bits at our feet, holds it up to his face and grins, saying, 'this bit's nearly sharp enough to have a shave with'.

Mr Green walks over to a boulder sitting in the sand and points to a smooth, shallow depression on top. It's a grinding stone, he says, the depression worn down by countless hours of stone grinding against stone in an effort to sharpen implements.

'This sort of stone is usually only found on the coast but it has also been found far inland. Tribes used to come from the mountains and trade, say, kangaroo skins for stone tools made on the coast,' he said. Inland river stone was too hard for fashioning tools.

But this evidence of prehistoric toil won't always be around. The seas are getting bigger year by year, Mr Green said, taking with them more stones each season.

'There's no way we can protect this quarry from the sea, it's Mother Nature taking her course. For that reason we'd like people to appreciate sites like this while they're still here.'

The next stop on the tour is the

two large middens about 2km south of Frenchmans Rock.

Thousands, perhaps millions of bits of shell, bleached snow-white over millennia, are scattered on two distinct dunes. They look like ordinary dunes during summer, but weeks of rain has washed the sand away and exposed the remains of countless feasts.

'See the blackness coming to the surface over there,' Mr Green points to one midden, 'there's been fires on that one and the rain has brought the ash up.'

There are pearly bits of abalone shell, mussel shells and smashed whorls of thick shell one would expect to find only in deep waters. Mr Green said men would fashion fish hooks from the curve of suitable shells.

He has found ancient fish skeletons and mutton bird beaks in these middens. Men would paddle canoes over to Green Island, off Swansea Heads, and catch nesting mutton birds for food.

'The women used to swim around those rocks out there and collect shellfish and mussels and the men would catch fish,' Mr Green said.

'They'd all meet, maybe a few clans sometimes, have a big feed, then leave the rubbish in these huge

piles. What a great life,' he smiles.

Middens are one of the most common forms of historical sites found in the area. They are scattered from Swansea Heads to Port Stephens and along the foreshores of Lake Macquarie.

The Raymond Terrace office of the National Parks and Wildlife Service keeps records of about 2000 known Aboriginal sites in the region. All sites, whether registered or not, are protected by law.

Mr Green said the Bahtabah clan was part of the much larger Awabakal tribe which lived in the Newcastle-Lake Macquarie area. The Bahtabah people occupied an area from Charlestown to Swansea.

Much is known of them through the memoirs of Lancelot Edward Threlkeld, a European who established an Aboriginal mission in 1825 near the present Gungah Hotel in Belmont.

Threlkeld was among the first Europeans to conduct systematic studies of the Awabakal language. During the 17 years of the mission, he observed and kept detailed records of many of the clan's customs in food gathering, hunting, social gatherings and initiations.

He was helped in his study of the Awabakal language and lifestyle by a remarkable man called Biraban, taken as a boy from the Awabakal tribe to Sydney. He learnt to speak English fluently and was known as Johnny M'Gill.

The Lake Macquarie Aborigines suffered tragically as a result of European occupation. By about 1820 scores of people in many of the coastal tribes had died, the first serious decimation sparked by the introduction of smallpox in 1788.

Men took to run and fertility declined as introduced venereal diseases spread.

In 1839 Threlkeld reported of his mission, 'the decrease of the Aborigines proceeds rapidly; in the elapse of a very few years, humanly speaking, the race will become extinct in these parts.'

One of the sites included on the Bahtabah tour has been made inaccessible by heavy rain during the past few months. A five-kilometre walk from a reserve at the northern edge of Windale leads to a rarely-visited group of caves once used by Aborigines as shelter. Mr Green said there were stunning paintings inside one of the caves.

The most spectacular and significant rock and cave paintings are found in the mountain ranges around Wollombi and the Upper Hunter, deliberately not publicised to save them from souvenir hunters and vandals.

The last spot on the Bahtabah tour is at the end of Highfields Parade, Kahibah. Within a few hundred metres of houses is thickening bushland flanking Flaggy Creek.

Mr Green squats down on a large expanse of mossy rock close to the now swollen creek and points to several small, deep pits and a few-pronounced grooves etched into the hard rock.

He said Aboriginal men would spend hours sharpening their axes and spear heads against the sandstone, splashing water into the holes to hasten the process.

We are standing in a clearing, once an Aboriginal campsite. Water splashes over boulders nearby and we are surrounded by rampant greenery and moist air.

'This is a beautiful place, I can understand why people camped here,' Mr Green says quietly. He points to a perfectly round water-hole, about two metres in diameter near the creek. It has been cut into

the rock by Aborigines to catch and store water in drier times. It's now brimming.

It is in this clearing that the Bahatabah dancers, youths with their bodies painted, perform traditional dances for tour visitors.

'It's very still in this clearing, and the sound of the didgeridoo bounces off the rocks and creates a marvellous atmosphere. People are bowled over by it all,' Mr Green said.

He said public appreciation of his people's history and culture was growing as never before and people were often surprised by the beauty of legends and sites found in the Hunter.

'People often think the only worthwhile sites are in the Northern Territory, but that's not the case,' he said.

'The coastal strip here is rich in Aboriginal history and artefacts because so many people lived here. There were plenty of fish, fresh water, shellfish and berries for everyone.'

Tours are available on Tuesdays and Thursdays by arrangement with the Bahtabah Aboriginal Land Council on 71-4800.



Bahtabah Aboriginal Land Council member, Mr Ossie Slee, at one of the middens on Swansea Headland.

Newcastle

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